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Document Citation

Title	**Stuff of dreams: look back with Anger**
Author(s)	Mick Brown
Source	*Correspondent (London)*
Date	1990 Jan 14
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	Life section, p.41
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Anger, Kenneth (1927), Santa Monica, California, United States
Film Subjects	

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Anger, Kenneth

Kenneth Anger believes in magic, but he finances his own films by debunking the glamour myths of Hollywood's great days. **Mick Brown** *reports*

Stuff of dreams: look back with Anger

Kenneth Anger lives in a world of his own in his Los Angeles apartment. There he isolates himself from the gloss of Hollywood today, surrounding himself with relics of the past ROBERT GUMPERT

FROM an early age, Kenneth Anger was interested in death. When silent movie star Thelma Todd was murdered in the garage of her Los Angeles house, Anger went over to watch them take out the body. "It was only a couple of blocks away . . ." He was five at the time.

It became an absorbing hobby. When he was 13, Lupe Velez committed suicide. Known as the Mexican Spitfire, Velez was a tempestuous starlet, once married to Johnny Weissmuller. Fading, and pregnant by a Hollywood gigolo, she planned a fairytale farewell. She decked her bedroom with flowers, dressed in her best silver lame gown (acquired on credit), swallowed 75 Seconal tablets, and lay down awaiting despatch to the biggest headlines of her career. The tablets reacted with her Last Supper of spicy Mexican food. She was found next morning, dead with her head down in the bowl of her Egyptian Chartreuse Onyx Hush-Flush Model Deluxe toilet. Kenneth Anger knows it was Egyptian Chartreuse because the next day, when the story broke, he went over to Lupe's house to interrogate the cook and the maid.

It is the attention to detail that makes the story, no denying it; but nobody could ever accuse Kenneth Anger of not being thorough. It was some years later that Anger assembled his memories, stories and yellowing newspaper clippings into a book, *Hollywood Babylon*, an exhaustive trawl through the film community's most infamous suicides, murders and sexual scandals. Originally published in France in 1960, where Anger was living at the time, it became an instant *succès de scandale*. It was not published in its unexpurgated form in America until 1975. A second volume followed, and a third is on the way.

These books are Anger's "bread and butter", subsidising his main activity of film-making. This week he arrives in London to deliver a lecture at the National Film Theatre – *Inside the Pleasure Dome: The Magick Worlds of Kenneth Anger*, amidst a season of his films. These are underground classics – underground, perhaps, because however inspirational they have been to mainstream film-makers such as Fassbinder and David Lynch, they are in themselves utterly indifferent to cinematic convention. Narrative, plot and character development are conspicuous by their absence.

Among their themes are homo-eroticism, violence and pagan magic – the last inspired by enthusiasm for the works of the late Aleister Crowley, the English occultist whom Beaverbrook newspapers once reviled as "the wickedest man in the world". Anger prefers to see him as a misunderstood genius.

Crowley was the author of *The Book of the Law*, written, so he claimed, at the instruction of his Guardian angel, Aiwass, in Cairo in 1904. Crowley (who, coincidentally, visited Hollywood in 1916 and took note of the Hollywood crowd as "cocaine-crazed sexual lunatics") claimed his own book as unquestioned evidence of a higher intelligence with whom man could communicate. The message of this enlightened one: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law". Crowley appointed a "spiritual son", one Jack Parsons, to carry on his work after his death. And, in Hollywood, Parsons initiated Anger into Crowley's Ordo Templi Orientis.

The son of an aeronautics engineer, who paid him scant attention, Anger was closer to his grandmother, who had worked as a wardrobe mistress on the silent epics for United Artists' studios. Her tittle-tattle about the stars, their seamy lives and exotic downfalls were, he says, "my Grimm's fairy tales". In 1935, at the age of five, he appeared as the changeling prince in Max Reinhardt's film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; borne on a dwarf pony through an enchanted forest, on a Warner Brothers lot, high on the aroma of shellac, Anger was confirmed in his vocation – not to act, but to capture magic. He started clipping newspapers, loitering on the fringes of premieres, became an ambulance-chasing adolescent.

He made his first exhibited film, *Fireworks*, at the age of 17 – a lonely boy's fantasy of being beaten by sailors, shot on his parents home-movie camera while they were away, with the help of his grandmother. Jean Cocteau saw the film and invited Anger to Paris. In 1950 he sold the family silver and set sail. In Paris, he worked as a curator at Cinemathèque Francaise, wrote *Hollywood Babylon*, and began to make films which he expected almost no one to see. The best known is *Scorpio Rising* (bikers, juxtapositions of Marlon Brando and Christ), made in 1964; the closest to Anger himself is *Lucifer Rising*, which he describes as his attempt to restore the fallen angel in the pre-Christian, and Crowleyian, perspective of "bringer of light". Others find it incomprehensible.

Begun in 1967 (shown but never finished), this involved, at its various stages, Mick Jagger, Marianne Faithfull, Jimmy Page (of Led Zeppelin), and an erstwhile rock singer named Bobby Beausoleil, who is presently serving life-imprisonment in America on murder charges.

"Kenneth had a huge and very conscious influence on the Stones," says Marianne Faithfull. "I think he thought Mick and the rest of the group could embody his vision. He would leave books on magic lying around the house, quite deliberately, for Mick to pick up, which he did.". Jagger was originally to play the role of Lucifer in Anger's film, but changed his mind. Faithfull took the role of Lilith, Lucifer's betrothed (velvet capes, snakeskin platform boots). "I was a bit afraid of him," she says. "I thought he was decadent. I was happier when he had his director's hat on. But he is a magician – there's no way round it. Being a film director is all about conjuring illusion. As a director, he was excellent – courteous, fastidious, understanding, wise, and I was very thick. I was a heroin addict at the time."

Anger was exactly right for the atmosphere of the times, carrying as he did the aroma of magic, hedonism – the possibility of a dangerous flirtation with evil. "Again and again inexplicable things involving him would happen," writes Tony Sanchez in *Up and Down with the Rolling Stones*, a memoir of supplying drugs to Keith Richard. "Once, for example, Robert Fraser arranged an opening party for some white sculptures that John Lennon and Yoko One had created. It was a zany party with all the guests dressed in white. We were even forced to drink white mineral water. I saw Kenneth clearly at the party, but when I went across to talk to him, he seemed to have vanished. I thought little of it until that afternoon when Anita, Marianne, Keith and Mick all said that they, too, had seen Kenneth but had been unable to find him when they wanted to talk with him. 'Anyway,' said Anita, 'it's very strange because Kenneth told me he wouldn't be able to come to the exhibition because he was going to be in Germany'." The story says more about the spirit of the times (fanciful, stoned) than it says about Kenneth Anger; but clearly he made some people feel uneasy.

My impression of Anger when I met him for the first time in London, in the Seventies, was of a mild-mannered man, conservatively clothed in a brown corduroy suit. Later, in a restaurant, perspiring heavily, he removed his jacket, and rolled up his shirt-sleeves, to reveal a tattoo on each arm – the Seal of Lucifer and the Seal of Crowley. This was somewhat disconcerting – a feeling enhanced by having spent that afternoon at the National Film Theatre watching, at his insistence, a 1930s British film musical called *Chu Chin Chow*, starring Anna May Wong. Which is about as far from Lucifer as you can get.

A friend of Anger's recalls another evening at the NFT, for a screening of the Clara Bow film, *Call Her Savage*. Came the scene where Bow starts whipping her co-star, Gilbert Rowland: screams of laughter could be heard from the front row. "Oh!" the friend turned to his companion. "Kenneth must be in town." He was.

Such conventional camp may be hard to equate with Crowleyism, magic, the fatal blessings of sex scandal. To Anger it is all of a piece. The macabre revelations of *Hollywood Babylon* are a necessary corrective to the glamour. Glamour is one component in Kenneth Anger's definition of evil – "although, of course, my defintion of evil is not everybody else's. Evil is being involved in the glamour and charm aspect of material existence – glamour in its old Gaelic sense, meaning enchantment with the look of things, rather than the soul of things."

As an author, he would see himself as a latter-day Suetonius, the Roman historian who chronicled the vagaries of the Caesars, or Saint-Simon, writing about the court of Louis XIV. "My basic motto for the whole thing is from *Midsummer Night's Dream*, which is Puck's comment, what fools these mortals be. In the movie business there's so much money and people being blown up into inflatable gods that its easy for them to get punctured."

Not surprisingly given the content of his films, Anger has never courted, nor been courted by, Hollywood. He is currently haggling over funds to make a film based on *Hollywood Babylon*. Another project, *Mouse Heaven* – a "revised history" of Mickey Mouse – is being funded by J Paul Getty, another aficionado of old Hollywood. This will rescue Mickey from his latter-day fate as corporate emblem and restore him as "a naughty little rodent". It is being accomplished through the medium of wind-up toys made before 1937 – thereby avoiding copyright. "It's my revenge on Walt Disney."

"Kenneth's films are the product of a system of beliefs," says Marianne Faithfull. "He is working almost to a higher directive – whatever you think of it. He's presenting another side of reality, and at the same time giving a glimpse of his inner life, which is rare in a way because no matter how well you know Kenneth you never know him. He's off on his own path."

"My films *are* like an inner spiritual journey," says Anger. "They're spells. That's my intention. They have a conscious sense of mystery to them, combined with a Crowleyian kind of diabolic humour. And they require work on the part of the audience; they've got to fill in the gaps. They're difficult films. I'm a rather difficult person."

Kenneth Anger now lives in Hollywood in a part of town once glamorous, now Third World. He keeps the blinds drawn – he says to protect his collection of vintage movie posters from the light, friends say to shut off the world outside. "To stay pure. I don't think Kenneth much likes the world at large," says one. "He prefers to create his own."

I visited Anger once, in New York. His apartment consisted of four rooms: two completely red – floors, walls, furnishings – two blue. In one corner stood a shrine to Rudolf Valentino, the silent movie star, which had once belonged to Dirta Flamé, the famous "Woman In Black" who for years would appear at Valentino's graveside on the anniversary of his death. "Let me know if you want a drink," he said, "we can go over the road." He refuses to have comestibles on the premises; the refrigerator was filled with manuscripts.

He talked about magic, scandal, the fatal attraction of stardom, hubris and nemesis, raising the ghosts of Hollywood. The telephone rang. It was a fellow vintage buff from the West Coast. Anger became very cordial, offering genial tips on the availability and quality of old prints. As a voice on the telephone line Anger must have seemed just a harmless old fellow with a passion for celluloid. Perhaps he is.

■ *Kenneth Anger will be hosting an evening at the National Film Theatre on January 17, NFT 1, at 8.45pm. Ticket information: 01-928 3232.*

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